THE BREAD OF AFFLICTION

The Food Supply in the USSR During World War II

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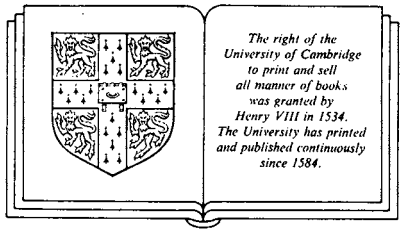

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Introduction

On June 22, 1941, nearly two years after World War II had begun in Europe, the war came to the Soviet Union. German invaders, some 175 divisions of them, motorized, with massive armor and air support, rolled swiftly and irresistibly forward like lava across Soviet territory. They struck northeast toward Leningrad, due east toward Moscow, and southeast toward Kiev. In their path were the lives of millions of people, already buffeted by the stormy events of Soviet history. Only twenty-four years earlier, revolution had overturned the nation's rulers; then civil war ruptured the country, setting brother against brother; and a decade later the peasantry was brutally torn apart by collectivization.

There is a common theme in all these struggles: Food. The abiding, underlying theme of Soviet political economy during its early years was the struggle to feed the population. At times that struggle had been lost. A Soviet citizen who was 55 years old or more in 1941 could remember the famine of 1891, one who was 25 or older could remember the famine of 1921 to 1922, and one who was only about 15 years old could remember the famine of 1932 to 1933.

Ensuring that famine would not occur was connected to the question that goes to the heart of Soviet political economy: Could a proletarian dictatorship rule in a peasant country and at the same time find ways to persuade or force the peasants to produce enough food to feed the population? The food issue is thus a major part of the fabric of Soviet history. War Communism, for example, was born of the need for the new Soviet regime to requisition food to survive the Civil War. The New Economic Policy (NEP) had a twofold purpose; it was designed, first, to provide peasants with incentives to produce more so that the towns would not starve and, second, to heal the breach between the party and peasantry caused by the forced requisitioning of food during the Civil War. The failure of NEP to solve

the food problem in the 1920s provided the justification for collectivization that emerged as a result of real or imagined fears that enough food would not be supplied to the urban population. To ensure that the industrialization drive would succeed, the Soviets used violence and even famine against the peasantry in the early 1930s.

World War II once again forced the regime to contend with the threat of extinction and the danger of food shortages. Major food-producing areas were lost to the Germans very early. Indeed, by the end of November 1941 the Germans held Soviet territory that had produced 84 percent of the nation's sugar, 38 percent of its grain, and 60 percent of its pigs.[1] There was also a loss of agricultural machinery in these territories and a decline in the male labor force because of the military draft. Almost overnight, the nation's capacity to feed itself fell with dramatic force.

In 1941 the Soviet people once again faced the ugly specter of starvation, less than a decade after the mass starvation of 1933 and barely two decades after the hungry years of the Civil War. Relief supplies were sought from food-rich countries, but the response was only grudging. And what food was received from the West was allocated by the Soviet government almost entirely to the armed forces, rather than being used to improve the civilian food supply.

Nevertheless, the Soviet Union won the war. This book is the story of how the Soviet Union, specifically how Soviet planning, dealt with feeding its people during World War II. Most often, the Soviet victory, achieved in the face of enormous human and economic losses, is seen as a sign of the effectiveness of the centralized institutions of the planned industrial economic system created by Stalin. In the words of James Millar: "Stalinist political and economic institutions proved their stability, flexibility, and durability in World War II."[2] But there are many reasons to think that these institutions worked quite imperfectly in respect to the food supply or, more accurately, that the institutions worked better to feed the army than they did to feed the civilian population. In fact, the war demonstrated the limitations of central planning, which works best because it channels resources to areas that have been given priority status. But once everything has priority, as happens during war – supplying hardware to the armed forces, feeding the military, feeding civilians, protecting precious natural resources – the weaknesses of central planning are demonstrated.

[1] Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the U.S.S.R.*, London: Penguin, 1969, p. 270.
[2] James R. Millar, *The ABCs of Soviet Socialism*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981, p. 43.

My fundamental argument in this book is that, in respect to feeding the civilian population, a decision was made early in the war to decentralize production and distribution and to require the population explicitly to rely on local resources for most of its food, a policy that created severe difficulties for the population. Understandably, feeding the army was given a higher priority than feeding civilians, a policy that further complicated the food situation in the rear. It was not until the tide of the war turned that the central authority resumed its primacy in feeding the population. Thus, while Soviet power was used to feed the armed forces, the solution to the problem of feeding the civilian population was not to use the strength of the centralized Soviet planning system, but to force the population to find the capacity to feed itself. The new emphasis on local initiative fostered the creation and expansion of institutions that relied on private economic activity. Not since the years of NEP had there been so much license given to the private sector. People displayed a rather remarkable degree of ingenuity, born largely out of a sense of desperation, in finding ways to produce and distribute food.

Notwithstanding the chronic food problems of the civilian population, those in the unoccupied areas fared better than those who lived under German occupation. With the exception of the nightmarish experience of Leningrad, the only mass starvation appears to have taken place in occupied areas, although starvation was not absent in the hinterlands.

A very special aspect of this study is a series of interviews with Soviet émigrés about their experiences during the war in regard to the food situation. The interviews were generally an hour or more in length and those interviewed fall into several important categories, soldiers as well as civilians. One of the major handicaps for scholars who are working on the war period is the inaccessibility of adequate archival material to balance the one-sided testimony of the official press and other self-serving accounts. The thirty-one interviews I completed provide an extraordinary window into a set of experiences we know of only at a superficial level. The stories I have heard add specific detail and texture to our knowledge of the food issue during the war. What I found is that the memories of those interviewed are extremely keen. They remember many events during this period as though they occurred yesterday. Some of them still recall the precise date they were evacuated from their home city. What has emerged from these interviews is an astonishing set of stories that in part confirm what was printed in the official press. However, often the

content of the interviews seriously contradicts official Soviet claims as to what happened. Those who lived through the experience bear a special witness.

Thus unfolds the tale of how a nation fed itself after experiencing a massive invasion of its territory, including critical food-producing areas, carried out a frantic evacuation of people and factories to the depths of the country, and then swiftly gathered up its energies to fight and conquer Nazi Germany.